



Rare Sources of Information on Swathi Thirunal

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Introduction

2013-2014 is the bicentenary year of Swathi Thirunal [1813-1846]. During the 1980s, a few great musicians and not-so-great historians/scholars/thinkers came forward with baseless theories about the authenticity of Swathi Thirunal's musical contributions. This author has published widely to clear the clouds of the controversy (see for instance article titled *De-mystifying Swathi Thirunal* in Journal of Madras Music Academy, Vol 80, 2009 and *Travancore's Composer King*, Sruthi, Chennai, June 2013). In this article, the author presents a list of rare references on Swathi Thirunal that he has unearthed through his research, some of which are known but never highlighted enough, and some of which are totally new.

Swathi Thirunal Ponnuthampuran Kalpichakkiya Krithikal (1853)

The most prominent discovery achieved by this researcher has been the unearthing of the book titled *Swathi Thirunal Ponnuthampuran Kalpichundakkiyathil Utsava Prabandhavum, Ajamilopakhyanam*,

Kuchelopakhyanam Manipravala Padangalum. The Malayalam book printed in the Kerala Vilasam Press in 1853, a few years after the demise of Swathi Thirunal, contains 60 of his compositions. The book is arguably the first major printed work on Carnatic Music and predated Veena Ramanujan's 1859 book by six years.

Sangeetha Sarvartha Saara Sangraham by Vina Ramanuja (1859)

This Telugu book, one of the earliest books printed and published on Carnatic music after the Trinity's period, contains the Swathi Thirunal Krithi *Sarasasamamukha Khamas- Adi* which is described as *Malayalapu Kulasekhara Maharajugari Kriti*. Swathi Thirunal compositions appeared along with the first printing of Thyagaraja's works, as early as in 1859.

Thiruvithamcore Charitham by Pachu Moothathu (1868)

Reckoned as the first history book on Travancore by a native says this about Swathi Thirunal: 'Chothi Thirunal Kulasekhara Perumal incarnated in 988, Medam. In



1004, Chothi Thirunal Rama Varma Kuleskhara Perumal started his reign. *Padmagarbham* was conducted in 1009. The king passed away in 1022. He was very intelligent and remained a scholar in literature, music and many languages. He had faith in truth and god and also in people who stood by truth. He was very kind and compassionate and performed plenty of *Dana Darmas*. Hearing his fame, people from many different places, people of great accomplishments in various arts and subjects, came to pay their respects to him and he received them with all respect and honored them befitting to their status and accomplishments”

Native Life of Travancore by Samuel Mateer (1870)

Samuel Mateer, a famous Christian missionary who worked in Southern Travancore was a person who looked at Travancore royalty with critical eyes. Mateer’s appreciative reference about Swathi Thirunal’s composition - “More special interest naturally attaches to a poem composed and published by H.H. the late rajah Vunjee Bala Rama Vurmah, elder uncle of the present Maharajah, who died in 1846. It is considered by native scholars to be a good specimen of modern Sanskrit poetry, the compound poetical terms being formed according to standard rules, the sentences skillfully constructed, and the whole adapted to be sung to the most popular and melodious Hindu tunes”. He goes on to give a translation of the *Sudha Saveri* Varna, *Jagadeesa Sreejane*, referring to it as “composed & published” by Swathi Thirunal and that it is “adapted to be sung to the most popular and melodious Hindu tunes”. This is a clear evidence of not only the composer status of Swathi Thirunal, but also a pointer to the popularity of his compositions in 1870s.

Gayaka Parijatham by Tachur Singaracharalu (1877)

This Telugu book contains the popular Swathi Krithi, *Sarasa Sama Mukha* in Khamas and indicates the then popularity of Swathi Krithis in South India.

Bhasha Charitham by P. Govinda Pillai (1883)

Section No. 771 of the book Malayala Bhasha Charithram (1883), is titled *Chothi Thirunal Maharaja* and refers to the wide reach of his songs in 1880s: “Hearing about his fame, many scholars from far off places came to Thiruvananthapuram, and on his request had settled here. His Highness was very intelligent and was great scholar in literature, music and many other languages. He had composed songs in Sanskrit, Malayalam, Telugu, Manipravalam etc. All of them are being sung by musicians both in Kerala and outside. It is also seen that many of them are printed. *Kuchelopakhyanam* and *Ajamilopakhyanam* are the important ones among Sanskrit Prabandha works, and *Navarathna Maala* among Sanskrit Keerthana and *Utsava Prabandham* among Malayalam are the major works”.

Navarathri Keerthanam by Bhagavathy Pillai (1883)

This is yet another work that has been brought to light by the current researcher. The cover page of this book says that the book contains Navarathri Keerthanam and many other compositions of *Thonnooram aaundu Thiruavatharam Cheytharuliya Swathi Thirunal Ponnu Thampuram Thirumanasu kondu Kalpichundakeiyathu*. One composition, *Palaya Yamunakoola Vihara* in Mohanam is not known till date. 37 other Sanskrit compositions are there.

Hindu Music and Gayan Samaj (1887)

An active member of the Gayan Samaj, Capt C.R. Day, an English army officer, who published a book on Indian music seems to have communicated to the then Maharaja of Travancore, Visakhram Thirunal (who is the son of Swathi’s sister). In 1885, C. R. Day, through Poona Gayan Samaj sought information regarding Swathi Thirunal, the details of which appear in the Samaj’s Souvenir. C. R. Day has asked “Was Sarasa Samamukha by Maharaja Kulasekhara ? If so at what date ? It appears to be popular all over South India” and the Maharaja replied “The note Sarasa



Samamukha was composed by Vanchi Bala Rama Varma Kulasekhara Perumal Maharaja, who reigned between 1829-30 and 1846-47. The exact date of this particular composition is difficult to ascertain as every year His Highness produced lots of them”.

The Music and Musical Instruments of Southern India and Deccan by Capt. C. R. Day (1891)

The book, published in London has a chapter on *Famous Indian Musicians of the South*. The list starts, not surprisingly, with *Tiagya Raja*. Soon to follow are *Siyama Sastri* and *Diksitalu*, and we find at least 7 names which can be reckoned as Travancoreans. *The late Maharaja Kolasekhara of Travancore* is one such. C R day says: “The composition of the next melody is attributed to Kolasekhara, a former Maharajah of Travancore, which perhaps accounts in some way for its wide popularity. One great peculiarity of the compositions of the Maharajah is the copious insertion of what are called *Svaraksheeras* in them. To make my meaning clear – the Hindu gamut, as has been stated, is signified by the syllables *Sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*. The composer has adroitly introduced these syllables at the very place where the notes signified by them occur in the song, without interfering with the sense of the words. This is the more difficult to do when we remember that in Hindu music the notes must follow each other in a particular order, according to the raga, and not exactly according to the composer’s fancy...”. His listing of Swathi Thirunal among *Famous Indian Musicians*, reinforces the status of Swathi Thirunal as a renowned musician.

Sangeetha Gunadarsham by Appa Swami Pillai (1891)

Yet another book brought to light now is *Sangeethagunadarsham* published in 1892. In the preface, the author T. Appaswami Pillai describes the selection of songs: “... with a copious selection of valued Krithies by the great masters of music such as

those of His Highness Swathi Thirunal, one of the late renowned Maharajas of Travancore in part-II”. It may be noted that the book also contains works of Tyagaraja, Deekshithar, Shyamasastri, Subbaraya Sastrikal, Veena Kuppayyar, Pattanam Subramanya Iyer and padams of Kshetrappa.

Oriental Music in European Notation by Chinna Swami Muthaliar (1893)

Oriental Music in European Notation is a monumental work published in Madras in 1893, and attempted to document in staff notation most of the popular compositions known at the time. The second issue of the publication includes four Kulasekhara Maharaja compositions (*Sarasasamamukha* in *Khamas*, *Saure Vithara* in *Durbar*, *Padasanathi* in *Kamboji*, *Sarasaksha* in *Panthuwarali*). In the third issue also, a 12 raga ragamalika composition of Kulasekhara Maharaja is announced. In the section on peculiarities in Indian Music, China Swamy Muthaliar says: “Adaption of names of notes to syllables in the text at appropriate places- A good many composers take also a particular delight in arranging their music and words in such a manner that the syllables pronounced coincide with the names of the notes sung at the commencement of a bar or the conclusion of a phrase; and this is considered a great feat; in Europe it would perhaps be regarded as puerile, though the example annexed shows that the idea is not altogether Asiatic; even such a distinguished authority as his late highness Kulasekhara Maharaja of Travancore did not consider this artifice beneath his dignity; a large number of his compositions have been framed in accordance with this principle.”

In announcing the content, Muthaliar says: “I: Complete works of Tyagarajayya composing of 700 melodies; II. The works of other great masters, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Syama Sastri, Subbaraya Sastri, Vira Kuppayya, Sadasiva Rao, H.H. Kulasekhara Maharaja, Pattaru Subramania Iyya, in short every composer living or dead whose works possess real merit”. A foot note in the page above also states: “A certain musician



who had composed a melody in this style appeared before the Maharaja and boasted that he had accomplished an extraordinary feat such as had never been attempted before. His Highness at once produced a number of pieces of the same kind, to show that he himself was capable of doing great deal more without difficulty.”

The above content in the works of Chinnaśwamy Muthaliar provide evidence to the *Vaggeyakara* status of Swathi Thirunal and his status among other. The anecdote having “at once producing a number of pieces of the same kind”, is the most explicit reference to the musical ability of Swathi Thirunal. The notation of two songs which closely follow the currently sung musical structure is yet another proof that helps in establishing the original music of his compositions.

Gayakalochanam by Tachur Singaracharalu (1902)

This Telugu book includes 12 compositions under *Malayalam Kulasekhara Maharajugari Krtulu*. We find that out of the 12 compositions, all except 2 match their current forms. The song *Paripalaya* is sung currently in *Saranga* and *Gopala Pabimam* in *Revagupthi*. But also given as *Yamunakalyani* and *Bhoopalam* respectively.

Sangeetha Sambradaya Pradarshini by Subbarama Deekshithar (1904)

This Telugu book contains 76 biographies of composers including Subbarama Dikshitar himself. Compositions of Venkatamakhin, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Ramaswami Dikshitar (the father of Muttuswami Dikshitar), Tyagaraja, Shyama Shastri, Swathi Thirunal and over hundred other pieces of other composers are included. In the section titled *Vaggeyakara Charithamu*, at No.43 a brief biography of Swathi Thirunal appears titled “Kulasekhara Perumal: He was the crowned king who ruled the *samsthanam* of Thiruvananthapuram. This capable King of Kerala learnt many languages including Sanskrit, Andhra, Huna, Kerala and Hindusthani. He possessed expert ability in music. He

composed, in *rakti* ragas and *desiya* ragas, innumerable *cauka varnas*, and a vast number of *kirthanas* in Sanskrit language which were replete with poetic beauty and which bear the stamp signature of *Padmanabha*. He is said to have authored many *kavyas* such as *campu*. He composed *cauka varna* padams in Telugu. He also composed many kritis in Kerala language. It is almost seventy years since this devotee of Padmanabha reached the lotus feet of Padmanabha.” This again is very strong evidence to support the prolificity of Swathi Thirunal as a composer.

Pradamabhyasa Pusthakamu by Subharama Deekshithar (1905)

The book includes 2 Varnams - *Rupamu Juci, Chonka Varnam* by Muthuswami Deekshithar and *Sami Nine, Chonka Varnam* in *Yadukula Kamboji* by Malayalapu Kulasekhara Maharaja. In the section titled *Kirtanas useful for Beginners*, the kriti *Mandhara Dhara* in *Thodi* is given in notation and attributed to Malayalapu Kulasekhara Maharaja.

Karunamritha Sagaram by Abraham Pandithar (1917)

Famous scholar from Tamil Nadu, Abraham Pandithar writes: “Kulasekharaperumal - the Maharajah of Travancore. He was gifted with the knowledge of Malayalam, Telugu, Hindustani, Sanskrit and the English language. He was very learned in music and took a special interest in it. He has composed many *chonka varnams* and *keerthanams* in *rakti* and *desika* ragas with the name of *Padmanabha* at the end.”

Conclusion

Selected references mentioned in this article are a clear indication of the *vaggeyakara* status enjoyed by Swathi Thirunal and also the popularity of his songs in South India, which are seen printed in Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil since 1853. Some of the references clearly indicate his musical genius. That a few songs of his were freshly tuned in 1940s, does not rob him of greatness. Regarding the opposition a few have raised about



equating him to Trinity, obviously, one needs to admit the right of others to disagree. They must not however forget, every state automatically identifies their icons in each field. It was Swathi Thirunal who established the Carnatic school over the traditional Sopanam (this is both a recognition and a criticism that is tar-

geted at Swathi Thirunal) in Kerala. The Trinity is of course owned by all Carnatic music lovers all over the world. But that doesn't prevent them from having their local icons. The Trinity complemented by Purandara Dasa, Annamacharya and Swathi Thirunal is required to make Carnatic Music into South Indian music.

About the Author : *Dr Achuthsankar S Nair , who heads the Dept of Computational Biology and Bioinformatics, University of Kerala, is an electrical engineer who had his education from University of Kerala, IIT-Bombay and University of Cambridge-UK. In addition to teaching and research, he writes on varied topics like local history of Thiruvananthapuram, Carnatic music, environmental protection, preservation of historical landmarks and is also a performing Carnatic vocalist.*